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RSC proposed cuts incite friction among House GOP

By [Patrick O'Connor](#)

COMMENT

House conservatives called for broad spending cuts yesterday to offset emergency funding in response to Hurricane Katrina, a move that triggered heightened friction between leadership officials and the right wing of the GOP conference.

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The tensions illustrate a growing divide within the party about how to handle hurricane relief as another storm heads for the battered Gulf Coast region.

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Yesterday's rally was an echo of the so-called Republican Revolution, when the current majority first swept into power behind their brash new Speaker, Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), after the 1994 elections. Conference conservatives pointed to a number of government programs, both big and small, they would like to eliminate from the federal budget.

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Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.), chairman of the conservative Republican Study Committee (RSC), whose office helped organize the rally, gave a careful disclaimer before other members took to the podium that each offset was not endorsed by every member present.

FEATURES

Some of the suggested targets are long-standing targets of conservative scorn, such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the foreign-operations budget and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Other legislative wish-list items to be included on the congressional chopping block were money for Egypt, funding for the mission to Mars, federal matching funds for presidential candidates and foreign aid to any country that does not back a sufficient percentage of American proposals to the United Nations.

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Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.) did not suggest any cuts but recommended the federal government sell its unused land to private investors.

One of the biggest proposed offsets was Rep. Jeff Flake's (R-Ariz.) call to postpone the Medicare prescription-drug benefit one year. Flake, a vocal opponent of the bill when it passed the House during a contentious three-hour vote in 2003, said postponing the benefit would save the federal government approximately \$40 billion next year.

"Our seniors have gone 220 years without a prescription-drug benefit," Flake said. "I think they can wait one more year."

The White House flatly rejected that suggestion earlier this week. The benefit goes into effect Jan. 1.

Members and aides throughout the conference, particularly Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), have questioned the feasibility of the suggested cuts. DeLay told the conference this morning that the highway bill took two years to complete and was significantly less expensive than the one that was initially proposed.

"A lot of this looks like they're mugging for camera attention rather than focusing on what they can get done," a GOP leadership aide said. "They're setting up a problem with their own conservative base if they can't achieve what they're looking to get done."

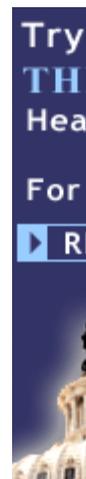
In response, one conservative aide said, "The majority leader asked for offsets and so we brought him offsets, and we look forward to working with him to get them enacted. The last time I checked, the conservative base is the Republican base, not our own base, and it would do them well to listen to conservative folks out in the country."

Asked how conservatives could push some of these initiatives if leadership is not behind them, Pence said, "Don't leave the American people out of the equation."

That public discourse has rankled senior Republicans, including members of leadership and committee chairmen.

During a meeting of elected leadership Tuesday night, Ways and Means Chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.) said the spending debate should be held behind closed doors, not in full view of the media, and Budget Committee Chairman Jim Nussle (R-Iowa) said it was the administration's responsibility to dictate spending restraints.

DeLay echoed Thomas's message during a morning conference meeting yesterday. Throughout the week, the majority leader has



reminded members and the media that spending cuts have long been a priority of the Republican-led Congress.

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Ron Bonjean, the communications director to House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), convened a meeting yesterday afternoon with some of the RSC press aides whose bosses were involved in yesterday's rally to remind them that Republican initiatives have created job growth and lowered the deficit, according to a GOP aide.

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Hundreds of staff members, reporters and selected supporters gathered on the Cannon Terrace for yesterday's rally, an exceptional attendance by all accounts.

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A large group of supporters clad in white "Freedom Works" T-shirts provided a backdrop for the assembled RSC members. They held signs throughout the briefing that read: "Victims over Pork," "Rescue Taxpayers from a Flood ... of RED INK" and "Don't Make a Natural Disaster into a Budget Disaster."

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Conservatives even expressed concern for Bush's financial legacy.

"Folks, I don't want my president to leave office with a \$10 trillion deficit," said Rep. Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.). "I don't want China to own more of our country through our debt."

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